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ABSTRACT

The literature on role-playing as a classroom instructional technique for English as a second language has addressed its benefits in improved acquisition of language or linguistic skills, communicative skills, cross-cultural skills, and interpersonal skills. However, promoters of role-playing may have set their goals too high and may be wasting class time that could be devoted to more academic and vocational communicative objectives. Conversational routines are easy to manipulate but very difficult to instill in students. While traditional teaching methods reward the "memorizers" (introverts), and methods based on the goal of communicative competence reward the "actors" (extroverts), psycholinguists have not yet proven one learning style to be inherently superior to another. Role playing may be less effective in actual practice than it seems in theory. (MSE)

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IS ROLE PLAYING AN EFFECTIVE EFL TEACHING TECHNIQUE?

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The major issues in second language teaching today center on the interrelationships between language learning, the individual, and context. This approach stands in contrast to the behavioral-structuralist approach, which assumed that if linguistic forms could be mastered through decontextualized drills and pattern practices, the student would be capable of applying the forms to life outside the classroom. Having found this method to be somewhat boring and ineffective, classroom teachers are striving to provide the appropriate contextualization now believed to promote the acquisition of the communicative functions of language.

As a result of this shift in focus, the technique of role playing, with its many variations, has become very popular. However, its effectiveness has been difficult to validate. There are several reasons for this, all of which can be traced back to questions in linguistic (sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic) theory. First, there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic form and communicative function. Second, there is no straightforward way of measuring the intricate relationship between language comprehension and production or between competence and performance. Third, we still know very little about the interdependencies among language, thought, and communication within specific cultures and sub-cultures. Fourth, we are only now discovering the influence of affect, or emotion, on the individual's social and non-social cognition.

The professional literature on role playing may be categorized according to the benefits this technique offers the student in terms of improved acquisition of (1) language or linguistic skills, (2) communicative skills, (3) cross-cultural skills, and (4) interpersonal relationship skills. After referring to several articles that examine each category, I will discuss some reasons why role playing in actual practice may not be as effective as it appears in theory.

ACQUISITION OF LINGUISTIC SKILLS

How does the use of role playing lead to improved acquisition of linguistic skills? According to Scarcella in "Socio-Drama for Social Interaction" (1978), role plays are useful for two reasons. First, they force the student to pay attention. Students pay attention to the verbal environment in role play activities because these activities are relevant to their interests. "utilizing both extrinsic motivation, which refers

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to the students' daily interests and cares, and intrinsic motivation, which refers to the students' internal feelings and attitudes" (Stevick 1971 in Scarcella 1978:45). They also pay attention because everyone, even the audience, has an active role; because they are working with peers; and because they are involved in a "problem-solving activity which simulates real life situations" (Scarcella:45).

Secondly, role plays allow students the choice of learning through formal rules or informal acquisition. In one phase of the activity,

the teacher isolates vocabulary, and perhaps some grammatical structures and discourse strategies in a formal way and appeals to the students; conscious learning processes. However, in the enactment stage there is no overt teaching. Thus, students are free to accept or reject language from the enactment discourse much as speakers do in everyday language situations. (Rietmann 1977 in Scarcella:45)

Scarcella also claims that the teacher can create a relaxed atmosphere through socio-drama, one which gives students "practice and security in performing before others" (45). The emphasis, then, is on oral performance of a role as an indicator of linguistic knowledge.

Another example of the connection between linguistic skills and role playing is mentioned by DiPietro in "The Open-Ended Scenario: A New Approach to Conversation."

According to Clark (1980:55), for example, the intention of role-plays is to put the students into a realistic communication situation in order to "sharpen their listening comprehension skills, bring them into contact with new language, and discover areas where they need additional practice." (DiPietro 1982:15)

However, DiPietro regards these purposes for using role plays as inadequate. As we will see later, he advocates "the open-ended scenario? as a means to encourage the student to produce authentic, self-generated, communicative language.

In "Breaking Down the Free Conversation Myth," Taylor and Wolfson (1978) claim that "in a domestic EFL program, class time devoted to having foreign students talk in a totally free and unstructured way is wasted" (31). In other words, having students "produce" conversations merely for the sake of practicing forms aloud in order to achieve fluency does not work. For one thing, students who are already fluent will

dominate the conversations, leaving others to listen to their ungrammatical structures. But more importantly for Taylor and Wolfson, such conversation is not "goal oriented." They cite a number of studies (Selinker 1972; Gardner and Lambert 1972; Lukmani 1972; Taylor 1973; and Saegert, Scott, Perkins, and Tucker 1974) in which English proficiency was tied to students' goals rather than to length of EFL study.

According to this view, language proficiency includes not only linguistic rules but sociolinguistic rules of use. In the Taylor-Wolfson model, sociolinguistic rules are explicitly taught, similarly to the way course content in history or sociology is presented. Then, sample situations are used to illustrate the rules. Finally, the students practice the model by role playing a similar situation. The emphasis is on accomplishing a goal while following the rules of speaking.

ACQUISITION OF COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS

Di Pietro has been influenced by the British linguist M.A.K. Halliday who views language as inseparable from social context. In "The Concept of Personal Involvement in Foreign Language Study," Di Pietro (1984) has developed some of Halliday's ideas into a classroom procedure called "strategic interaction." By using open-ended scenarios, he has added a new, vital dimension to role playing. His approach provides an answer to our second question, "How does the use of role playing lead to the student's improved acquisition of communicative skills?"

For Di Pietro the student must be free to decide how, with whom, and for what intention s/he is going to interact with others in a role play situation. Traditional role plays have proved to be inadequate because they were constructed only as "learning-enhancement activities" for the purpose of practicing certain "social protocols and grammatical constructions" (1984: 13). His idea is that "if we are to seek ego involvement with our language, thereby fostering acquisition, then we must build a bridge between the methodology and the student's personal experiences" (1984:13-14). In his courses, students begin by using teacher-constructed scenarios drawn from newspapers, literature, etc., but eventually they are able to devise their own scenarios based on events in their personal lives. In this way the students "develop a feeling of control that is not possible with role plays or memorized dialogues" (14).

Di Pietro notes the following example:

Lantolf and Khanji report on the language use of a student who was allowed to switch from discussing a picture (as in the bilingual syntax measurement test) to talking about religion, a matter of much greater interest to him. The shift in topic from one that was clearly artifactual to one that was, for all intents, a "real" interest resulted in a marked change in verbal behavior. The change included the use of embedded clauses, an expanded vocabulary, and a more concerted effort to employ nonverbals to support conversatoin. (1984:14)

In "Discourse and Real-Life Roles in the ESL Classroom," Di Pietro points out two dimensions within which the formal structure of discourse is embedded. One is 'transactional' which involves the intentions and strategies of the speakers; the other is 'interactional' which consists of the "social, maturational, and emotive roles" of the participants (1981:28). Human discourse occurs as 'scripting;' that is, what people say and how they say it are based on their previous socialization experiences.

According to Di Pietro, verbal strategies differ on the basis of whether or not the role relationship is reciprocal. If the interactants are moving toward an expected shared goal (e.g. a customer buying a hat from a salesperson), their language will be complementary and a lot of redundant material can be omitted without causing ambiguities. Verbal strategies will also differ on the basis of whether or not the role relationship is a longstanding one.

In his article on open-ended scenarios, Di Pietro (1982) expands the notion of strategies as a verbal repertoire that is responsive to speakers' intentions and adequate for use over time to include also the structural features of conversation, such as openers, connectors, preclosers, and closers as well as other devices for correcting false starts, marking turn-taking, etc. At the present time, teachers have no other pedagogical means of teaching these skills than by illustrating them. There is also a need to develop classroom techniques for using direct, oral conversation to generate the more indirect, reported language in the written mode.

ACQUISITION OF CROSS-CULTURAL SKILLS

"How does the use of role playing lead to a student's improved acquisition of cross-cultural skills?" In "The Use of Role Play to Overcome Cultural Fatigue," Donahue and Parsons (1982)

present a method of using role play as an opportunity for discussing cultural differences in a sensitive manner. Their reason for using role plays is to help students understand that by learning a new language, "they are not being asked to change their identity but are being asked to change the form through which they express that identity" (360). The desired outcomes of this kind of role play are trust and tolerance of others. In the final step of the Donahue-Parsons procedure, the goals are

a) to realize the difference between analytically observing another's performance of a role and emotionally becoming that character

b) to provide insight on how culture influences actions subconsciously (363)

They close their article by citing Rivers' (1972) suggestion that foreign language programs be redesigned to achieve the outcome of changing the students' attitudes toward their own language and toward language and communication in general.

In a related article, "Living the Language through Simulation," Semke argues for in-depth, extended role play, using her own method as a prototype.

Although flexible in design, the unit was planned for twenty-eight to thirty (fifty-minute) class sessions (in other words, six to seven weeks...), with every second day devoted to the actual simulation and alternate days used for preparation, which includes cultural research, vocabulary learning, and grammar review. The simulation can be adapted to class sizes of from ten to twenty-five students, perhaps even more. (4)

In order to involve her students in authentic, realistic role play, she felt that the following elaborate preparations were necessary:

In order to obtain these role models, I spent a summer in the countries of West Germany, Austria, and Switzerland interviewing people of various ages and walks of life. All in all, I visited in the homes of eighteen different families and conducted interviews with a total of thirty-seven individuals of these families... The respondents and their environments were photographed... These thirty-seven people provide a pool of authentic role models for the simulation. (5)

Although Semke's thoroughness is impressive, not all teachers would agree completely with her assumptions. However, the idea of having students work at identifying with the roles of persons in another culture leads us naturally to our fourth and final question, "How does the use of role play lead to students' improved acquisition of inter-personal skills?"

ACQUISITION OF INTER-PERSONAL SKILLS

This fourth question goes to the core of the rationale behind the role play technique. It is assumed that language use involves decisions about "appropriateness" and "politeness" rather than "correctness." In fact, "correctness" has been successfully shown to be a socially relative term that traditional teachers who focused on the standard language were misusing. Standard language sets up middle class values and world view as the norm to be followed.

However, the relativistic "performance" representation of "linguistic reality" as being "interaction" still leaves many questions unsatisfactorily answered. The more researchers look at "appropriateness" and "choice" in communication, the more they discover the tremendous power of language teachers to shape the perceptions their students will have of others. Language teachers, whether they realize it or not, possess great power to speak for the group whose language they are teaching and thus to manipulate value systems as well as language systems. Hunsinger (1982) in "Methodologies of Teaching Communication Ethics," puts it this way:

At the very outset it must be stated that communication and ethical decision making are so intertwined that one cannot be thought of without the other. Ethics, as a systematic, moral, philosophical, and religious set of principles, is established by a dynamic process of communication. The formulation of an ethical code is both an intra and interpersonal process and the expression of ethical decisions is dependent on communicative abilities.

Ethics is more than thinking and talk. Our attitudes and actions are the means of communicating our ethical positions. However, when we enter into ethical decision making exercises, we often find that the way we communicate our ethical choices are conditioned by the dynamics of the communication process more than by our well developed "ethical systems." If we are responsive to feedback from others in our communication we can almost feel the pressures being exerted when we make ethical decisions involving other people. (3)

Hunsinger also is in favor of using the socio-drama technique. From observing his students perform in role plays, he has discovered that "ethical choice must be forced and if there are not time limits on the socio-dramas and no demand for choices to be made the students will just continue to talk to avoid that crucial point of making the decisions" (9). This insight should be of interest to humanistic language teachers like Di Pietro. Many of Di Pietro's sample scenarios require strategies for telling white lies or getting out of awkward or embarrassing situations.

The reason for exalting the effectiveness of role plays appears to be that it promotes learning new behaviors in a less artificial and more interactive way than do other techniques. Most psychologists, linguists, and social scientists would like to believe that by controlling variables they can predict "behavior," that is, predict the decisions that people will most likely make according to appropriate role guidelines. However, to phenomenologists such a view is too simplistic.

Halling (1981), in "Surprised by the Other: Choice Points in Relationships," quotes the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty in the following excerpt:

'Science...manipulates things and gives up living in them...it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals.' (By 'real world' he means the world as it is given in experience.)...Yet phenomenological psychology aims to return to phenomena, to dwell in them and to circumscribe them. (2-3)

Halling observes that most psychological theory and research describe the decision-making process in terms of an individual's own conscious anticipation of dilemmas and systematic weighing of alternatives. In reality, however,

genuine 'contact' with another person occurs spontaneously when we are deeply in touch with ourselves, and is not the result of deliberate effort. At such moments--creative moments indeed as we have seen--we break away from roles and patterns, and are open to the novelty of the situation. (12-13)

In conclusion, I would not suggest that promoters of role plays are not concerned with human individuality and creativity. In fact, most of them aim for individual self-discovery through cross-cultural dramas. I would, however, caution that they may have set their goals too high and may, in the process, be wasting class time which could be devoted to more academic and vocational communicative objectives. Conversational routines are easy to manipulate but very difficult to instill in students. Whereas traditional teaching methods reward "the memorizers" (usually introverts), methods based on the goal of communicative competence reward "the actors" (usually the extroverts). However, psycholinguists have yet to prove that one learning style is inherently significantly superior to another. The memorizers might even be able to argue successfully that they "pay attention" and learn faster without having to "put on" or "stage" an act in the process.

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